

**COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE
STANDING COMMITTEE**

**INQUIRY INTO THE RECOGNITION AND ADEQUACY
OF THE RESPONSES BY STATE GOVERNMENT AGENCIES
TO EXPERIENCE OF TRAUMA BY WORKERS AND VOLUNTEERS
ARISING FROM DISASTERS**

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE
TAKEN AT PERTH
WEDNESDAY, 22 FEBRUARY 2012**

SESSION TWO

Members

**Mr A.P. O’Gorman (Chairman)
Mr A.P. Jacob (Deputy Chairman)
Ms M.M. Quirk
Mr I.M. Britza
Mr T.G. Stephens**

Hearing commenced at 11.05 am

OSBORN, MR MAX

Executive Officer, WA Volunteer Fire and Rescue Services Association, examined:

The CHAIRMAN: Thank you for coming in this morning. I am going to read a statement in a minute, but before I do, because I forgot to do it for the last witnesses, I will introduce the committee. To my left is Albert Jacobs, the member for Ocean Reef and deputy chair of the committee; Ian Britza is the member for Morley. You obviously know Margaret, the member for Girrawheen; and Tom Stephens, member for Pilbara. I am Tony O’Gorman, member for Joondalup and chair of the committee.

Before we start asking questions, I will read you the statement. When we close, I will read you a statement as well so that you know what happens.

This committee hearing is a proceeding of Parliament and warrants the same respect that proceedings in the house itself demand. Even though you are not required to give evidence on oath, any deliberate misleading of the committee may be regarded as a contempt of Parliament. Have you completed the “Details of Witness” form?

Mr Osborn: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you understand the notes at the bottom of the form?

Mr Osborn: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Did you receive and read an information for witnesses briefing sheet regarding giving evidence before a parliamentary committee?

Mr Osborn: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you have any questions relating to your appearance before the committee this morning?

Mr Osborn: No; that is fine.

The CHAIRMAN: Before we start, do you have any comment you would like to make to the committee about the hearing?

Mr Osborn: No; I do not think so; I think the information I gave you is a fair understanding of where we are coming from regarding your committee’s inquest.

The CHAIRMAN: Can you describe the procedures and processes offered to your volunteers who are dealing with stress and trauma by FESA’s occupational safety and health section and the chaplain?

Mr Osborn: Most of it comes through pamphlets and when the chaplain is called out to major incidents. But like any of these things, a lot of these incidents and people fall through the cracks because of, I think, more of a resourcing issue, probably financial issues as well. They go to major incidents but whether they are able to capture all those people is, in some respects, as much to do with one chaplain, I guess, and also the managers out there whether they are willing to get involved with volunteers in particular.

The CHAIRMAN: It is not just firefighters that are volunteers in your organisation; it is people who turn out to road trauma as well?

Mr Osborn: And they are volunteer firefighters as well.

The CHAIRMAN: Sorry.

Mr Osborn: All the people we look after from a welfare and safety point of view are volunteer firefighters. That is fire and rescue not bushfire. Bushfire is a totally different organisation.

The CHAIRMAN: I was just clarifying that for myself. What sort of support are chaplains providing?

Mr Osborn: Ron Wingate is the current FESA chaplain. He is fantastic, but he is only one person, although he uses other people because he is a Salvation Army chaplain by trade. He does use other people in his system as well, but it is a bit like a lot of these organisations. He prefers to go there himself. I suppose it is a continuity thing, but being one person in this vast state we have is an enormous issue for us and an enormous issue for him. I speak to him regularly about how he is able to offload some of the information he gets because he is going out there to some pretty horrific stuff. Unfortunately, the call-out for him is not perfect either. It depends on how busy the communications centre is whether he gets notified or not. I have asked for some time now to be part of that group so that I get called and we can contact our volunteer brigades because people are still slipping through the cracks. Things have improved over even the last week where they have had another career firefighter put in to the welfare department, and he is now going through the incidents on a daily basis and he is flicking some of that stuff off to me, so that part has improved a bit.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: What was the catalyst for that happening do you think?

Mr Osborn: Who knows. We have been pushing for some time stress management in particular. Now we have got it. Anneliese Smith has come on board as a psychologist but, again, she is only one person. They have targeted the 15 busiest brigades as far as road crash rescues are concerned because that is generally where most of the trauma comes from. They have gone out and done that. I have been to those sessions with her and they are fantastic sessions. We had one on Monday night, for example, at Gingin, which is the first one they have included, ambos and bushfire services volunteers as well. It is getting out there. But the difficulty is that, eventually, we can see what is going to happen. We will get handballed to a manager, who has not got those psychological skills and cannot talk about depression and all those sorts of things. We are constantly saying to Anneliese, “Look, be very careful who you send out there. We would prefer you to go and get some psychs in your system.”—she knows who is out there in the community—“and use those people rather than handball.” Once it gets to managers, the managers will deal with it personally based on their beliefs.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: Can you give us an example of a person who has become a volunteer that you have become aware of who has suffered critical incident stress maybe after attending a number of fatalities on the roads or what have you? Can you tell us about an individual?

Mr Osborn: I suppose the individual I can really talk about was a career firefighter. He got to the stage where he thought he was handling it pretty well. He was at Welshpool and went to an incident. Before we knew it he had basically gone into oblivion but, thankfully, because of the information he was getting—he was a trustee on our super board—he was more aware of some of these things so he actually went and got counselling. As he said, he stood up at one of the industrial organisations—you might have been there—at a function and blurted out what he had been through, so I think all those type of things all help, but it is only a very small captive audience as well that you are dealing with all the time.

The CHAIRMAN: Is there a record kept of all the volunteers who attend critical incidences?

Mr Osborn: Yes and no. The difficulty is that it relies on people putting in the fire records. What they do with those fire reports to glean that information I am not sure. Either that or we go to the station occurrence book. The difficulty with volunteers also is that no matter what the injury is, whether it be physical or mental, a lot of them are not going to put a worker’s comp claim or anything like that in because it will affect what they do from their work situation. If they are self-

employed some of them might do, but a lot of them who are working for wages generally tend not to claim. That is another failing of our system. The OSH reports have been upgraded just recently but they have been pretty average until now.

Mr I.M. BRITZA: I spoke with career fighter leadership last week. They made the comment, which I would like you to affirm or whatever, that they do not get to as many fatalities because they are on shift work. He particularly said many of the volunteers in the south west had been on deck for 12 or 15 years. They go through the same stuff. He then said, “I really don’t know who’s looking after them.” That is one of the issues that is particularly of concern.

Mr Osborn: It is exactly the same as what came up at Gingin on Monday night. The amount of incidents that volunteers go to, depending on what place they are in—

Gingin is in a dreadful situation where they have two highways going past and they can respond to either way. The problem is that they generally will know the person they go to. I was a career firefighter for 34 years; I do not think in all those times I ever came to an incident where I knew the people. But volunteers do, particularly on the Albany Highway where there are some horrific crashes and around Merredin in the last few years. Those people do not put up their hand up and say there is anything wrong with them. We keep saying to our captains of brigades, “If someone disappears or they are not around the brigade for a while, please, please, please put your hand up or ring us or do something so that we can capture those people”, because they do disappear outside the system. You are right, as I just explained, career firefighters very seldom come in contact with someone they know. Vollies will do it. Statistics show—police statistics in particular—that in Williams, for arguments sake, they were going through a dreadful spate of road accident and rescues out there for some time. It was proved beyond doubt that most of them came from the area and they slowed down after 140, 150 kms and think everything is going to be sweet, and unfortunately it does not happen that way.

[11.15 am]

The CHAIRMAN: Is there any peer support for volunteers that are out there, particularly the ones in the more remote areas?

Mr Osborn: The peer support was fantastic up until 10, 15 years ago perhaps. It was a brilliant system. It was put together on the right regime. People out in the volunteer system were trained as well so there was—And career people with career fire stations, most of those fire stations had a peer supporter. In some respects it was not used as well as it should have been. That depended on the individual. In some volunteers’ cases, if it was a career firefighter, they would not ring them. Why? Who knows? But it is part of being a person, I suppose. So, the peer support system was—as I have said in my papers—recognised worldwide. As a matter of fact, the Americans picked up our whole video that we put together going back some 20-odd years ago, and all they did was change the wording on it because they did not like the Australian pronunciations.

The CHAIRMAN: What happened 10 years or so ago that changed the effectiveness of the process?

Mr Osborn: I just think the hand was taken off the tiller. People were not giving it the same kudos it deserved.

The CHAIRMAN: Can it be reinstated?

Mr Osborn: Absolutely. What is happening at the moment through consultation and, I guess, me pushing as much as anybody, with Anneliese Smith in particular and Karen Roberts, who is the head of human resources, saying she would be happy again to—There is a circular going out next week asking all our volunteers what they liked about past system, if they have dealt with it, and what they think the new system should have.

The CHAIRMAN: If you have a firefighter or a volunteer who wants to refer himself or decides he or she has got an issue, is there a method where they can refer themselves for some outside support or mental health support?

Mr Osborn: There is. They are told they can go to the two companies that are provided by FESA, which is completely confidential, at any stage and they can get up to, I think, six visits for any illness.

The CHAIRMAN: Can you tell us what those companies are?

Mr Osborn: Not off the top of my head, I cannot, sorry.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: We will check that with FESA. That video you talked about, Max, is that—

Mr Osborn: It was a career firefighting video. It was done by human resources in consultation with the union some time ago. I was one of the key players in that at the time. It was during the period when we were getting a chaplaincy service in FESA—or, in those days, the Fire Brigades Board.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: So we could access that through FESA?

Mr Osborn: Absolutely. Also, it was a similar model to what the police were running then as well, and we picked it up and we negotiated with the board at the time and said, “This is a very, very worthwhile cause. Let us get up and push it,” and it was pushed and supported by the Fire Brigades Board in those days. There is a very, very good system running at the moment, we know, out of Queensland. They have got about 50 peer supporters up there. They do not let any of their peer supporters go to anywhere without two of them being there. I think it is a fantastic model. It can probably be made better or whatever, but the other important part of it is that out of those 50 people they have got, about 10 they send to every major incident. So, two of them go to every major incident so they can see what is going on between them and talk about it and deal with the issues rather than one person having to try to front it.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: Now, overseas we saw in a couple of places retired firefighters were being used as peer support. With your other hat on as a former firey, is that something you think is a good idea or might be worth pursuing?

Mr Osborn: I definitely think it is worth pursuing. There are numerous issues going on both within and without FESA at the moment. Whether it be volunteer or career firefighters, they could use mentors. There are heaps of people out there who would love to be a mentor. But the peer support system was a really good system and it was developed. Also, a lot of the wives and partners, if you like, got involved as well. So it was not just purely career firefighters doing that.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: Fatigue management, I think, has a bit of a crossover with capacity to handle stress. From a volunteer’s perspective do you think that is handled well or needs some work?

Mr Osborn: It needs a hell of a lot of work. There is a drug and alcohol policy and a fatigue management policy now going through. There have been some discussions. We got the fatigue management policy the other day, without any consultation, but that will be dealt with. But fatigue management is an enormous issue for us. The difficulty is—I call them the “Mighty Mouse brigade”, if you like; as soon as they get a call, their jocks go on the outside. That is typical of most people; their brains go into neutral. I asked the manager at the Carnarvon fires the other day what he was doing to protect the incident commander or at least go out there and see what is going on. He said, “Oh, I am working at the IMC.” I said, “That is fantastic. You are in the air-conditioned office and they are out there in 40, 45 degree heat.” He said, “Oh, I went up in the chopper and saw what was going on.” I said, “Well, did you relay that to the person on the ground?” “Oh, no.” I said, “Have you ever thought you could have got in your car and driven out—not taken over the incident, but just go out there and see if all our volunteers are going okay?” After the last incidents we have had, especially Margaret River, Carnarvon and a few that have happened in the last month or so, I have approached the president of our association and said, “The next time there is a major

incident—I nearly went to Northcliffe the other day—where our volunteers are being used, go out there and just see what is going on.” Because, unfortunately, people are people and if there is a fire going, they think they have to stay there forever, and it is not the case. They are trying to get them off the fire ground. The career firefighters get criticised because they might drive from Perth to Geraldton, for argument’s sake—it probably takes them four to five hours to drive there in a fire truck—and when they get there they say, “We are not going on the fire ground until we have had a break,” but our volunteers will not do that. More and more of our volunteers who are prepared to go to these incidents all over the state are being called on and I think it is abusing their willingness to go out and protect the community.

The CHAIRMAN: Max, what is the control and command in that situation? I mean, if you bring fireys from Perth to Carnarvon, volunteers, surely there is a staging process where they are issued with instructions and things like that. Is there not a process in place that says, “You have just done a four-hour or five-hour drive; you go and have a sleep”?

Mr Osborn: Unfortunately, no.

The CHAIRMAN: Because I imagine those incidents are being coordinated by FESA—

Mr Osborn: Absolutely—or DEC.

The CHAIRMAN: Is it normally a career person or would it be a volunteer to coordinate it?

Mr Osborn: The incident commander at most of them will be a volunteer, but now—since Keelty 1 anyway—there has been a greater emphasis on incident management teams getting together. That is an enormous issue as well because it is okay when we have career fire stations—they are pretty under-resourced, too, from a management point of view—but once you get further off the coast it becomes very, very difficult to put an incident management team together. That is one of the issues we are talking to Wayne Gregson about at the moment and saying, “Look, it’s fine to put all these resources along the coast, but we believe if a manager is operational, they should be within—we are saying at the moment; it is our first stab at it—a 200 km radius of the towns they look after.” We have a pretty good case for them because the police put their people where they should be and we believe ours should do the same thing. Not necessarily to go there and take over the incident, but as I spoke to a manager down south two weekends ago, he said that as soon as he gets a call of a major incident of any type, he jumps straight in his car and goes straight to that brigade. Now, most times when he gets there, he finds that they are back on station, but at least he can have a look at the staff or volunteers and find out how they look, how they are feeling and deal with it that way. Those managers are really their only link between FESA and us or FESA and the brigades.

The CHAIRMAN: I was in Queensland just after cyclone Larry and they brought in people from all over the country and they staged them from their headquarters, but as soon as they got there, they were told the situation, but they were all designated time off. We found the same in Christchurch; they designated three eight-hour periods. So you had eight hours’ work, eight hours’ time off and eight hours’ sleep. That was the way they designated it in Christchurch. So, does that not happen?

Mr Osborn: That was the first question I asked of the manager that we were talking about at Dongara. I said, “What are you doing? How many shifts are you using?” Once again, you cannot blame the management any more than you can blame the volunteers. The volunteers just put their hands up and say, “We’re not doing it.” The career firefighters, in the main, will. The difficulty also is that people get isolated at some of these incidents and get forgotten. That is as much our criticism as anything else. The communication system—well, I do not think we should go there. Some people say it is fixed and other people say it is not fixed. The new WAERN system is definitely not fixed, in our view.

The CHAIRMAN: I think I have been on this committee the best part of 11 years and one of the first things we heard was about the communications system and I think we are still hearing the same thing.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: Clearly the message is not getting through.

Mr Osborn: I was quite concerned when I heard that they were using channel 39, which is a CB channel, up at Carnarvon, but when you stand back and think, “Why are they using 39?”, the reason they are using 39 is that it is the only way they can communicate with the farmer brigades up there. So it was not as stupid as it sounded. At least the new WAERN system where it has been implemented and it has not gone any further—I do not think it is even in Carnarvon at the moment. At least it has got that interoperability capability, so we have gone some way forward. But the biggest problem with that communication system is that it was not controlled by a single person and it started off in Esperance. I do not know why you would start off a system in Esperance. It is going to have some bugs in it and every time something happens you have got to go there. Continually, the management of that section to do that has changed. People have been there for six, 12 months and they have gone. So, the next one has had to come along and pick it up. It has been a failure of management as much as anything to keep people in those positions. I do not know how you deal with that.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: That would certainly be a stressor for volunteers, would it not, if comms are not working?

Mr Osborn: Absolutely.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: Would you come across volunteers who leave every year because they are just saying they cannot take it anymore, it is too stressful or whatever?

Mr Osborn: It would be a bit of both. You do not see it, Margaret, very often because they just disappear out of the system. Unless someone puts their hand up and says, “Look, this is happening,” because the counselling services are purely confidential, you cannot pick them up there either. I have now got a system in place where at least if someone is off on any illness or injury, they tell me who the person is and I can ring the brigade and find out what is going on. Even that, I do not want too much information because I want to keep that confidential too. I do not want to let that cat out of the bag in case all of a sudden an employer picks it up and says, “Well, I am not going to employ that volunteer because he is injury prone” or whatever it might be. So it is a very, very touchy subject.

The CHAIRMAN: Is there any psychological testing with volunteers to determine whether they have got a profile that is suitable?

Mr Osborn: No, there is not. The difficulty with it is not so much we believe that it should not happen; it is more to do with how you do it, where you control it, is it consistent across the state? So, it has never been raised with us officially at all. It came out of your committee. We saw the reports. Our reaction to it is that we think we would probably lose more than we get and you would have to be very, very careful how you did it. If you went back and psychologically tested someone who has been in the brigade for 30 years, I do not think they would be there the next day. We have it now in training. We are trying to lift the training standard up to public safety standards and that is our philosophy. We have not got that through FESA yet, but we are working on it. That is a difficult area to deal with. If the psychological testing could be done and it could be done promptly and done easily, we probably would not have a problem with it. But if you lived at Lake Grace or somewhere like that, where would you go and who is going to pay for it? Is the volunteer going to drive that far? Could we have a resource online? We are not completely opposed to it. Why would we be? But I think it is a very difficult issue to bring into play and I do not know whether psychological testing that is even done for career firefighters is really up to the mark—put it that way.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: You have your volunteers spread across the state. In terms of training—for example, what signs to look for in terms of whether people have stress—is there any time you all get together or there is an annual conference or something in Perth?

Mr Osborn: Last year was the first time we had ever had an annual conference. It was very, very successful. As a matter of fact, it was the most successful as far as our brigades are concerned. We had some 130 people come to Perth, which represented probably 60 to 70 brigades out of the 90 we look after. So that was very successful. A lot of this peer support stuff and counselling and stress was certainly pushed at those sessions. We had half a day to talk to our brigades about different issues. We even picked some of those speakers up and brought them forward to the Saturday even though the bureaucracy did not want us to do that. We said that it is important we get the information relevant to us. A lot of the other information was a generalisation. So that was very successful.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: So that would be a good forum to do that?

Mr Osborn: Exactly.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: You said that was the first, so is that going to happen annually?

Mr Osborn: There is a debate going on at the moment because we were hoping to hang it off the back of AFAC, but where AFAC is being held that weekend, the conference centre is not available. FESA and us are now looking at where we can have it. It is certainly going to happen, probably somewhere between August and October this year.

The CHAIRMAN: Can you explain what AFAC is?

Mr Osborn: Australian Fire Authorities Council. All the chiefs get together regularly—sometimes work for us, sometimes work against us! Even though a lot of people do not like saying it, a lot of it does come from the Country Fire Authority in Victoria. They have the biggest group of volunteer firefighters in Australia. New South Wales would probably argue with that because they do.

The CHAIRMAN: Max, do you know how many of your volunteer fire brigades are outside of Perth and what sort of services are offered by those fire brigades to FESA?

Mr Osborn: Outside of Perth? There are 11 around the metropolitan area, two in ESL 1. There may be more than two now because one has expanded. There are 80 brigades, basically, that we control, from Karratha to Esperance to Nannup. They are all major centres in general. There are a lot of major centres out there that deserve fire and rescue service volunteers but do not get them. The best way to explain our brigade volunteers is that they are really career firefighters doing it for nothing, basically. That is a simple method. I am sure in Tom's area in particular, if they did not have them up there, I do not know what you would do.

The CHAIRMAN: I do not think we can underestimate the value of the volunteers to emergency response, not just fire control, all across the state.

Max, I thank you very much for coming in and giving us the benefit of your experience. I will read a closing statement. Again, thanks for your evidence to the committee this morning. A transcript of the hearing will be forwarded to you for correction of minor errors. Could you please make these corrections and return the transcript within 10 working days of the date of the covering letter. If the transcript is not returned within this period, it will be deemed to be correct. New material cannot be introduced via these corrections and the sense of your evidence cannot be altered. Should you wish to provide additional information or elaborate on particular points, could you please include a supplementary submission for the committee's consideration when you return your corrected transcript of evidence? Thank you very much for being available.

Hearing concluded at 11.32 am
